The War of 1812 is often called America’s Second War for Independence. The immediate causes of the war were the seizure of U.S. ships and seamen by the British Navy, as well as rapid expansion of the frontier, where British intrigue was blamed for American settlers’ troubles with Indians. For Britain, the war was a burdensome adjunct to its greater struggle against Napoleonic France. For genealogists today, the records created as a result of military service may help document the identities of ancestors. The discharge records discussed in this article may provide evidence of age, place of residence, and even place of birth, in addition to military service information.

During the early years of the Republic, the Regular Army was a relatively small fighting force supplemented as needed by regiments of volunteers or state militia units. When war was declared on 18 June 1812, the Regular Army consisted of about 10,000 men, half of whom were new recruits. To increase its strength, an Act of Congress of 26 June 1812 (2 Stat. 764) mandated that the Regular Army was to consist of 25 regiments of infantry, four of artillery, two of dragoons, one of riflemen, plus engineers and artificers, for a total authorized strength of 36,700 men. The Regular Army was enlarged again by an Act of Congress of 29 January 1813 (2 Stat. 794-797), which authorized the army to have 52 regiments of cavalry, artillery, dragoons, and infantry. In addition to these troops, volunteer regiments and state militia also took part in the conflict.

Each Regular Army infantry regiment was recruited from a particular state (or states). Rifle, artillery, and dragoons were recruited at large. Enlistment was normally for five years but, as the war went on, the term was shortened to “for the duration of the war.”

The young Republic was unready for the complexities of administering a large military. As one historian described it:

The government’s failure to pay soldiers on time has helped to preserve records that would normally not be available. During the nineteenth century, soldiers discharged from the regular or volunteer armies received a discharge certificate that became their personal property; the War Department did not keep a copy. However, if the soldier was owed pay upon his discharge, he presented the discharge to the paymaster in order to collect the pay, and, as a result, the discharge became part of the War Department’s records.

Thus, discharge certificates for about 2,000 soldiers who served in the Regular Army during the War

By Claire Prechtel-Kluskens

War of 1812 Discharge Certificates
of 1812 have been preserved and have been reproduced in National Archives Microfilm Publication M1856, *Discharge Certificates and Miscellaneous Records Relating to the Discharge of Soldiers from the Regular Army, 1792–1815* (six rolls). As the title indicates, it includes both discharge certificates as well as other records that served a similar function. A small number of records pre-date the war. A complete description of M1856, including lists of the soldiers by name and by regiment, is accessible online at <http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/military/1812_discharge_certificates.html>.

**Certificate of discharge**

Most of the records in M1856 are certificates of discharge. They typically include the dates of the soldier’s enlistment and discharge, the company and regiment in which he served, the amount and kinds of clothing provided to him, and the period for which he was due pay upon discharge. The discharge may also provide his place of birth, age, physical description, and occupation, so that the discharge could not be used for improper purposes in the event it was lost or stolen from the veteran. For example, the discharge of John Buntin (Capt. Samuel G. Hopkins’s Troop, 2nd Light Dragoons) indicates the reason for detailing his physical description as follows: “To prevent imposition or an improper use being made of this discharge . . . be it known that the sd. John Buntin is of the following description. . . .” As an example of the complete text of a discharge certificate, here is Samuel Dawson’s, a private in Capt. Samuel G. Hopkins’s Troop, 2nd Light Dragoons, which states:

*Camp Near Sackets Harbor*
*7th December 1813*

The Bearer hereof Samuel Dawson a private in Captain Samuel G. Hopkins’s Troop 2nd Regiment United States Light Dragoons has served for and during eighteen months; his term of service having expired on the 7th day of December 1813, he is entitled to an honorable discharge.

He has been paid up to the 31st day of May 1813, has returned his arms & accoutrements in good order and has received his full allowance of clothing.

He is entitled to pay from the 31st day of May 1813, together with three months pay as his allowance upon being honorably discharged and pay and rations from this place to Frankfort in the State of Kentucky being his place of residence.

To prevent imposition here follows a description of the said Samuel Dawson he is five feet five inches and half blue eyes fair complexion dark hair born in Amherst County in the State of Virginia and by Profession a Farmer.

[signed] Samuel Goode Hopkins
Capt. 2nd Reg. U.S. Light Dragoons


The discharge certificate may either be a printed “fill in the blank” form or entirely handwritten.

**Descriptive List**

The Descriptive List provides a description of the man and may indicate the clothing and other supplies furnished him. Some are in chart form while others are in narrative form. Both types sometimes indicate the information was taken from the company’s record book. The Descriptive List of William T. Smith (Capt. John Machnesney’s Co., 16th Infantry) indicates his age; physical description (height, color of eyes and hair, and complexion); place of birth; date, place, and term of enlistment and the name of the officer who enlisted him; occupation; amount of bounty paid and amount due; amount of pay due; and the number and type of each item of clothing issued to him. Finally, the officer’s certification indicates the information was “taken from the Company Book.”

**Certificate of death**

The certificate of death usually indicates the soldier’s date of death and unit in which he served. For example, the certificate of death for Henry Carman (2nd Artillery) states:


Both a discharge certificate and pay voucher have survived for some men.

**Pay voucher**

The pay voucher usually indicates the amount of pay due and/or the period of time for which pay was owed. For example, a pay voucher for Henry Carman (2nd Artillery) states:

*I Certify on Honor that there is pay Due to Henry Carman from the 31st day of Octbr 1813 until the 28 day of Feby 1814 the day of his Death and eight Dollars bounty[. ] he was enlisted for 18 months[,] he having Served faithfully unti[ll] his Death is entitled to three months extra Pay. [signed] Benjn S. Ogden, Lat[e] Capt U.S. artillery, Philad[elphi]a, 3d Novr 1815*

For more information


For more information about the discharge certificates, see “War of 1812 Discharge Certificates” at <http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/military/1812_discharge_certificates.html>.

Researchers can use M1856 at the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.; NARA’s 13 Regional Archives; Ohio Genealogical Society, Mansfield, Ohio; and possibly other libraries.

To request a copy of a discharge certificate from M1856, write a letter to Old Military and Civil Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20408, or e-mail through <http://www.archives.gov/global_pages/inquire_form.html>. In either case, be sure to include your name and mailing address, the soldier’s name and unit, and note that discharge has been reproduced in M1856. If you use the online inquiry form, you can put the information about the soldier and the M1856 citation in the “I have a question about research and records at NARA” block. Do not send money until you are instructed to do so.

**Note**


Claire Prechtel-Kluskens, a microfilm projects archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C., served as NGS registrar (1996–98) and director (1998–2000).